DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 145 908 JC 770 527

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TITLE Paraprofessionals as Counselors.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Counselor Role; Counselor Selection; Counselor Training; *Junior Colleges; *Paraprofessional Personnel; *Peer Counseling; Peer Relationship; Professional Recognition; *Student Personnel Services

ABSTRACT

An experiment using paraprofessionals as counselors began in summer 1972 at Allegany Community College with the hiring of three recent graduates whose primary responsibility was to enhance communication on campus among students and between students and staff. Guided by a weekly three-hour clinic session with the Dean of Student Services and by special training events, the paraprofessionals evolved their own areas of activity, becoming catalysts and referral agents to the student services staff. The program success insured its continuation and expansion through 1974-75, by which time all had become regularly employed in service areas. The experiment resulted in the following recommendations regarding the inclusion of paraprofessionals in student services: (1) the selection of open, accepting, assured persons is critical; (2) they must have the total commitment of at least one professional with some power on campus; (3) clinic sessions conducted by a support staff member seem to be most effective for training and personal growth; and (4) the role must be defined by institutional policy, preferably joined to an articulated career ladder. (RT)

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PARAPROFESSIONALS AS COUNSELORS

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PARAPROFESSIONALS AS COUNSELORS

Nestled in the mountains of Western Maryland, near Cumberland, is a small, attractive community college. The College, Allegany Community College, is in its 14th year of operation. It is a vital institution of higher education with much innovation occurring on campus. The vitality of the College has been enhanced by a variety of grants from the Appalachian Regional Commission. This article will concern itself with one of these innovations--the use of paraprofessionals as counselors.

Much of the literature on the use of paraprofessionals stresses the fact that there are some things that paraprofessionals do better than professionals. Establishing rapport with students, efficient routine task accomplishment, and easy identification with the group from which they came are some of the areas in which paraprofessionals appear to excel. There is not much agreement concerning the appropriate utilization of paraprofessionals. Prior to the start of the project in 1972-73, it was decided to use paraprofessionals as counselors on an experimental basis.

THE EXPERIMENT

Three young adults who were either recent graduates or close to graduation were hired as associate counselors during the late summer of 1972. They were told that their primary responsibility was to enhance communication on campus among students and between students and staff. This is no small task on an all commuter campus. They were further told that part of their responsibility would be to learn as much about the functioning of the staff as they could so they could help students make appropriate use of the staff. They were informed that they were being employed on an experimental basis and that the program might end at the end of the first year. They were told that they would have to

tell the college staff what they could do best, what needed to be done for students, and in general to develop their own job description.

This experimental approach created some feeling of resistance among the college staff. It often seems for all the experimentation done in higher education, it is quite frightening to undertake experimentation with higher education itself. The three paraprofessionals often felt very suspect that first year, feeling that they "needed to prove themselves." The creation of a new role in the institution, a layer between clerical and professional, was also of considerable concern to the college staff. Many questions were raised. "Are they clerical or professional?" "Can they attend college staff meetings?" "How can they counsel, they don't even have the proper credentials?" By midway through the first year, the Associate Counselors had begun to differentiate themselves. One was very active in the admissions-registration process, another was manager of the identification card service and assisting in intramurals, another was managing the game room and doing the only drug counseling on campus. They had all developed their own individual counseling case loads. The student services staff felt the presence of these young associates through their referrals, questions, and demands for more service to students.

The three associate counselors met weekly with the Dean of Student Services for a three hour clinic session. This time was spent discussing every aspect of their experience in their jobs. Specific emphasis was given to diagnosing and discussing the variety of counseling situations in which they found themselves. Other aspects of their training included: visitation, observation, and seminar experiences at Kent State University's Counseling Bureau, video taping of counseling situations role played by the counseling associates and

critiqued by visiting consultants, visitation to other campuses, attendance at workshops, conferences, and conventions, readings, and attendance at regular student service meetings.

By the end of the first year, it could clearly be shown that the work of the counseling associates resulted in greater service to students, not only from their efforts, but also from the efforts of the entire student services staff. They worked as a catalyst and referral agent for specific problem definition and resolution.

The project was continued a second year, 1973-74. Two of the counseling associates resigned, both to continue their education at four year institutions. Two new associate counselors were hired to replace them. The second year resulted in a further differentiation and sophistication of services offered to students by the counseling associates. Some of these services included:

1. Individual Counseling
2. Group Counseling
3. Drug Counseling
4. Instructional assistance in non-credit human relations training and in a credit course taught by counselors--Dynamics of Human Interaction
5. Tutoring
6. Advising
7. Registration Assistance
8. Game Room Manager
9. Identification Card Service Manager
10. Women's Interest Groups

11. Recruitment
12. Student Mailbox Assignments
13. Referral Service
14. Testing
15. Tour Guide
16. New Student Orientation
17. Admissions Interviews
18. Student Group Advising
19. Placement Interviews

For the third year, 1974-75, a specific need had developed in the Office of Financial Aid and Career Planning. One of the counseling associates was employed full time in that office. Under the direction of the Director of Counseling the paraprofessional who had been employed since the beginning of the project was assigned to teach a Dynamics of Human Interaction Course. The third paraprofessional is the supervisor of the Peer Counseling Program developed on campus the previous year. All of these duties are in addition to continuing the services mentioned above.

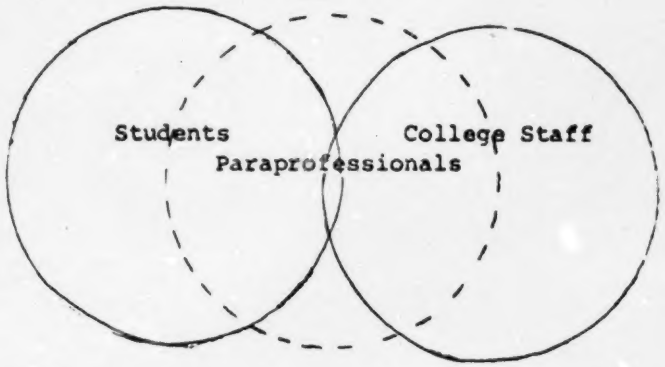
A PERSPECTIVE

The use of paraprofessionals in the helping professions seems to be a highly controversial issue. Professional organizations seem to be quite defensive about their use, usually delineating lines of authority so that the professionals are left clearly in charge. A variety of articles published on the use of paraprofessionals highlight the stresses felt by those who occupy these roles. The following titles reflect this. "Concerns of Some Semiprofessionals Working in Professionally Directed Programs," "Marginal

Men," "Paraprofessionals: In Search of Identity," and "Promised Land of Paraprofessional Careers." Paraprofessionals are referred to in a number of different ways: Non-professionals, semiprofessionals, aides, assistants, associates, support personnel, and differentiated staff. All of this may be an indication of the discomfort with the whole paraprofessional movement by professionals since most of the articles are written by professionals.

Experience gained from the project at Allegany Community College would suggest several key components to using paraprofessionals successfully as counselors.

The success of paraprofessionals as counselors may be understood more clearly by the schematic below. The students occupy their own sub-cultural, informal system on campus.



The college staff are a part of the formal system: defined roles and functions, policy and procedure, work relationships, task requirements, institutional norms, etc. This system is rarely understood by students. The paraprofessional is a member of both systems and he often works the interface between the two systems, negotiating injustices and differences. Although this fact is the key to the paraprofessionals success, it also makes him more vulnerable to both systems. It's pretty easy to get caught in the squeeze when you are in the middle.

SELECTION - the selection of people who are committed to helping others, have high acceptance of others with differing values, have some basic, congruent human communication skills, possess high self esteem, are warm and genuine in their relationships with others, have a high capacity for empathy, and can identify and express their feelings, will go further toward insuring the success of those selected than any training given them.

SUPPORT - It is critical that the paraprofessionals have total, unwavering commitment of at least one professional with some power on campus. The position is just too vulnerable to be without strong professional support. Where this support does not exist, paraprofessionals will either become student advocates and adversaries of the institutional system (and thereby jeopardizing their positions) or they will be defined by the professionals as subservient with highly specific and generally routine tasks to be performed. This may be an appropriate use of paraprofessionals, but the paraprofessional cannot be perceived as a counselor.

TRAINING - Clinic sessions seem to be more relevant for the paraprofessionals in their own growth and learning than any other form of training. The clinic sessions should be conducted by the support staff member. It is imperative that the paraprofessionals feel the support or they cannot open up and deal with those issues which are most personal and often most troubling. Clinic sessions involve as much a discovery of self, and learning from each other, as it does learning how to be a better counselor.

Participation in Student Service departmental meetings as an equal with professional staff also seemed to be a very meaningful experience. One of the paraprofessionals had the following to say after one year in his position,

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"I gained more knowledge working with the Student Services Staff than any book or classroom will ever teach me. Thank you for those who shared what is most important--your life."

Other aspects of training are important. Video taping is particularly powerful self feedback. A seminar experience with students in a graduate counseling program was very stimulating to the paraprofessionals. Visitations, workshops, conferences, and conventions were exciting and useful exchanges with professionals occurred. Yet the most powerful aspect of the training, restated for emphasis, was the clinic sessions. Oftentimes the clinic sessions would fade into a group counseling session. There appears to be no greater tool for training counselors than the presence of a skilled counselor using those skills when appropriate.

INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY - It is vital that the new role of paraprofessional be defined by institutional policy. Without this clear definition, the new roles can be quite threatening to people occupying roles above them and below them in the status system. It is further desirable to articulate this new role with higher roles in a career ladder format so that being a paraprofessional is not a dead end position. Institutionalizing policy and a career ladder can add substantially to the stability of the new role, thus ensuring greater effectiveness on the part of those serving in these roles.

CONCLUSION

From the experience gained at Allegany Community College it is apparent that appropriately selected and trained paraprofessionals can function very well in many areas previously reserved for professional counseling staff. It is very important that continuous support and ongoing training be tied to the counseling associate position to insure the effectiveness of those occupying the positions.